

DBMS: A profoundly positive institution

BY DAVID A. MITTELL, JR.

"The sea belongs to us all, and every aspect of it from halcyon calm to howling hurricane is fraught with beauty." -Samuel Eliot Morison, "Spring Tides"

With the talk about Duxbury as we knew it going to the bad dogs of poor taste and immodest scale, it's nice to be able to report the maturation of a profoundly positive and hopeful institution. For it has been just 20 years since a small group of bold and generous dreamers first conceived the idea of turning the falling-down boat yard near the collapsed and polluted "Guzzle" at Snug Harbor into a maritime school serving all.



An aerial view of the Duxbury Bay Maritime School, which was conceived 20 years ago. Photo courtesy DBMS Website

Today, the Duxbury Bay Maritime School reconnects the town with the sea, both literally and figuratively, and their goal of "serving all" is ever expanding. It means the Duxbury High School rowing and sailing teams competing on equal terms with those of the top New England prep schools. It means sailing for the handicapped. It means 24 city kids every summer's day arriving from Camp Wing to learn to sail and row. It means chair-bound patients from the Veterans Hospital in Brockton being lifted onto sailboats and sailing on the Bay as helmsmen. Like most good things that thrive, the Maritime School began as the longest of long shots. In 1995, the titles to the desired site were convoluted and complicated with longterm leases and hard-to-find owners. Several of the boatyard's sheds and offices were in deplorable shape. A less-than-beautiful commercial building sat in the middle of the one-time way from Washington Street to the water. The 19th century timbers that once kept the inlet known as the Guzzle and formed the wharf of the Duxbury Coal and Lumber Company had collapsed – spilling polluted muck into what was left of the Guzzle.

That is some of what the dreamers were up against. But they were not to be denied. As founder Ned Lawson says, this was Duxbury's last, best landing connecting dry land and salt water. He had sailed into ports where sailing was accessible to all, which in Duxbury it was not. Many years before, founder Charlie Fargo had promised his daughter Sara that some day he would make the privilege of the sailing they enjoyed at the Duxbury Yacht Club available to all her friends.

The other founders – there were 11 in all – shared these sentiments. Their names are Tony Chamberlain, Fred Clifford, Sam Dennis, Charlie Fargo, Sherm Hoyt, J.R. Kent, Ned Lawson, Pat Loring, Powell Robinson, Wayne Ogden and Ken Safe. The work on earth and shore of Sam Dennis and Ken Safe is finished. The living nine carry on.

Without a square foot of real estate or a single sailboat, the Duxbury Bay Maritime School was incorporated as a 501(C)3 on September 24, 1995. It was founded as a school partly because that is what the dreamers intended it to be and partly because a school has certain exemptions from special zoning permits. Most of the boatyard was owned by Amoskeag Corporation, a Maine outfit that Charlie Fargo happened to run. That shortened the long-shot by an inch or two.

Lessees included the Duxbury Marine Railway and the distinguished boat designer Jeff Gray. The Duxbury Yacht Club was approached about buying the site, moving its clubhouse there and leaving its present site for the school, but that idea didn't fly. Sailing at the club was in a periodic decline, and its officers feared a maritime school could kill it. Twenty years on, the opposite has happened: The school has so revived interest in sailing that it is thriving again at the DYC.

Fred Clifford had been deeply involved in the successful but complicated effort to turn the original Holy Family Church on St. George Street into the Ellison Center for the Arts. With that experience, he says, he was better equipped to overcome the hurdles the Maritime School would face. Several of the founders began by personally putting their money where their dreams were unto more than \$300,000. The Ellison Foundation then stepped in to fund the \$850,000 cost of buying the boatyard. With the founders' contributions that meant the school had \$300,000 in free cash. This may have been the moment the long shot became a sure thing. A word needs to be said about Bill Ellison and the Ellison Foundation. Bill Ellison, who died in 1988, was a lifelong man of the sea, a soft touch for good causes (especially when Duxbury was involved) and a regular guy of transcendent personal humility. His well-appointed duck blind on the Back River marsh was one of the few visible signs of his wealth.

Since Bill's passing, the Ellison Foundation has continued his extraordinary good works, which run from the very well-known to the completely anonymous. With the Maritime School, it was enough for the Foundation's managers to know: Bill would have loved this!

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The first, worst problem was the condition of the Guzzle. Here, Walter Amory, whose Duxbury firm was Amory Engineering, stepped in with his professional expertise and love for the town. The Guzzle was reinforced at minimal cost with serviceable steel girders previously used by the Big Dig. These were driven deep into the muck to create a new coffer dam and support a modern wharf, which was raised to a level two feet higher than the 100- year flood. For generations most of the Lawsons had been summer residents of Duxbury, where every one I knew was a lifelong sailor. Ned Lawson was a distinguished environmental lawyer who spent the icy months in Dedham. But when the question arose of who would be the founding director of the new school, Lawson said, "I'll do it!" Within months he, his wife Janet and their children were year-round townies. The summer of "readyabout" was 1998. The school owned enough of the property it needed, and Amory Engineering's new wharf was ready to last a couple of hundred years. The school's fleet numbered 60, including 24 20-footers and 20 prams. At Harvard College, Jane Fogg

of the Duxbury Foggs had been inspired by Mike Horn, Harvard's longtime sailing coach. He became the school's first Sailing Master. By the end of June he had 350 young sailors. By summers' end the United States Sailing Association had cited the Duxbury Bay Maritime School as the "most outstanding new sailing program" in the country. Every summer brought both programmatic improvements and new and better facilities. Rowing was added in 2001. That year the Ellison Foundation funded the purchase of the Marcotte Building (the commercial building noted above). By and by it was torn down to reopen the visual and actual way from Washington Street to the school, the wharf and the water. In 2003, the gambrelroof boat shed that some will remember as the "Anchorage" was torn down to make way for the Kenneth Safe Building, first used as a dormitory for out-of-town students and teachers. (The complexity of managing such a thing quickly led to different uses.) The school's main building is the 2009 Orin Smith building, designed by architect Michael Whitmore. It has ample room for the school to expand and a large function room named for Fred Clifford. What the layman notices are, first, everywhere natural light, even in December; and second, in nearly every room clear view of the bay.

Every young sailor or oarsman is treated to the same introductory drill. On Day One, there is "shore school" – a classroom exercise in which the student is taught the basics of what is to come. On Day Two, the student goes into the water with a life jacket on and experiences what it is to capsize. On Day Three, it is out to sail.



A sailor from Camp Wing tests his mettle on a boat at the Duxbury Bay Maritime School.
Photo by David Grossman

In 2008 Chuck Leonard succeeded Ned Lawson as executive director. Chuck lives in Duxbury; his grandparents were the last private owners of the nearby Nathaniel Winsor Jr. house. He was running a printing business in Norwell that did at-cost jobs for the Maritime School. One day he mentioned to Ned Lawson that he would prefer to work on the waterfront. "Why don't you take over for me?" Ned shot back.

So much for the nationwide search. At a place like DBMS, love of sailing and love of town are more important than anything else. The 20-year history of the school proves the validity of this.

Lawson explains the true mission of the school. The game of chess, he notes, has a fixed number of squares and pieces, and is considered fit only for the brainy. Sailing, by contrast, entails any number of moving pieces (sailboats) on a "chessboard" (the sea) that is constantly varying with fluky winds and waves.

In this sense, sailing is more complicated than chess. But, Lawson says, what it really is is experiential learning. It is preparation for life.